

EDWIN MILLER WHEELOCK AND THE ABOLITION MOVEMENT.

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FOLLOWING a biographical sketch of Edwin Miller Wheelock in the September issue, 1920, of the *OPEN COURT*, condensed in broad outline from an unpublished biography, there appeared in the February issue, 1922, a paper by the present writer dealing with the "John Brown sermon" of the author of *Proteus*, originally delivered from the pulpit of the Unitarian Church at Dover, New Hampshire, and redelivered at Theodore Parker's Music Hall in Boston on November 27, 1859—five days before the execution of the great abolitionist.

This was the crowning discourse of a series against negro slavery, Carlylean in tone and emphasis, with which the church at Dover had resounded at intervals during the several years preceding. The earlier sermons had attracted little attention beyond the confines of Dover. The sermon upon the death of John Brown, however, roused and stirred like a trumpet blast, and at once lifted its author from obscurity to a distinguished place among the anti-slavery crusaders.

The whole anti-slavery epoch, indeed, was of supreme importance in the life of our minister and was destined to mold his whole future career. But for the slavery agitation and the fratricidal war to which it led, his biography would have recorded a vastly different story. A brilliant name as a preacher and writer, growing from year to year—a pulpit of ever widening influence in some great religious center of the North or East—a silvery old age, enriched by the fruits of a beautiful but placid life and passed in the midst of a constant tribute of loving reverence. Such should in all likelihood have been the tenor of our story.

From earliest youth, as all evidences indicate, the subject of this biography had felt a peculiar abhorrence for the institution of slavery. His repugnance was no passing prejudice, nor was it a conviction born of any labored process of reason. It was instinctive and a part of his being. With him the love of personal and intellectual liberty was a passion, and it is not hard to understand that the thought of freedom denied, even to the least and humblest of human creatures should be revolting.

With a nature such as his a feeling of this kind could not be quieted by the whispers of prudence. His was essentially the prophet-soul. The instincts of the man of affairs and those of the statesman, with their readiness to compromise a principle in the interest of expediency, were foreign to him. With the seer's vision which all men of that order possess he beheld great human problems in their vital bearings upon the moral welfare of the race, and with a seer's unsparing utterance he recalled to men the eternal principles of justice which could not be disdained without the direst consequences of personal and national disaster. The pettier considerations which made for moderation, concession or temporary silence, were without appeal to his tremendously earnest nature. He was Truth's apostle, not her attorney, and his apostleship knew nothing of compromise and bargaining.

During his many years of life and work in the South after the war and during its progress, the complexity of the negro problem became clearer to him, and while abating nothing of his original attitude towards slavery as an institution he came to see and to contemplate with the uttermost sympathy the difficulties with which the Southern white populations were confronted in dealing with their black brothers. The view he always held, that the end of slavery was indispensable for the welfare of the South itself, was confirmed at closer range, but the universal dread of the consequences of emancipation, which had been felt in the South, he came to appreciate more and more as intimate contact with the negro gave him a clearer vision of his racial defects.

The years during which the destinies of our country were rocking on the surge of the slavery agitation were filled with bitterness. The words of the abolitionist were barbed with vituperation and scorn, and answer from the Southern leaders came back in like kind. Each day found negro slavery more hateful and hideous in the sight of the Northern reformer and each day found

Southern opinion more doggedly determined to preserve its freedom of action with regard to the institution.

In such an hour it is not to be expected that even pulpit discourses should be free from feeling, and the deliverances of that period must be read with the fact constantly in mind that extreme acrimony characterized the words not of one side only but of both, and that temperate utterance was difficult, and in the case of a strong, heroic, impassioned nature, whether on the one side or the other, wellnigh impossible.

In the case of him whose life we write, a long residence at the South bred a feeling of unwonted kindness toward the Southern people, which not even the occasional evidences of prejudice against him because of his Northern origin and war activities could mar. The sufferings of the South during the reconstruction days touched his naturally quick sympathies and the dishonesty and oppression so common in the administration of political offices in the South by the Northern conquerors filled him with indignation.

Even toward the leaders of the secession movement, viewing their actions more from the Southern angle than had been possible during the pulpit days at Dover, his feeling grew gentler, and in none of his sermons after the war, not even in the Decoration Day addresses of which several beautiful specimens found the light through the press, does any word of bitterness appear.

It is plain that the conservative influence of Harvard, with the discouragement of that atmosphere against any agitation of the slavery question, was not originally without its effect upon the pulpit at Dover, notwithstanding the powerful impulse in the opposite direction which the young minister's mind had received from the preaching of Parker at Boston. In the ordination discourse no mention appears of the subject of slavery—no word of the duty which might exist or might arise to express views upon that question. Even in the ordination sermon, however, there was a suspicious passage, giving token to the attentive ear that his silence on this great question was destined to short life. "Wherever a moral principle is involved in a public question," he had declared, "whether of trade or politics or legislation or social life, the Christian minister, as a champion of public morals, is bound to speak and act—to speak and act kindly, carefully and dispassionately indeed, but with all the manly freedom of one who is responsible only to his own conscience and to his God."

Direct mention of slavery we do not find in the earliest sermons at Dover but it is evident that toward the close of his first year he had begun not only to mature his views upon slavery but to give them utterance, for in the lecture of June 20, 1858, entitled "Literal Interpretation," defending a series of sermons he had delivered during the previous winter against the attack of Rev. T. J. Greenwood, he chides that gentleman for "consenting to be muzzled on the most momentous and sacred question that ever came before the pulpit of a nation." In the discourse, moreover, upon "Irreligious Politics" delivered in the preceding March—a discourse provoked by the use of liquor in an election held shortly before—our flaming young monitor had poured out the fires of his indignation upon the heads of those, even his own parishioners, who had offended, and declared, with something like a momentary forevision of the awful cataclysm to come, that while the law of God might have faded out of American politics it had not faded out of the sky nor out of the earth, "*and if we delay, it may yet be written up and down our land in letters of fire!*" He then added, pointedly:

"Thinking men are coming to say to the politician, you denounce the pro-slavery party of this land as atheistic, immoral and rotten from skin to core—you call on the friends of temperance and of freedom, upon the honesty, the morality, the Christianity of the community, to aid you in your effort to purify the morals and character of the people and to re-enact the laws of God. We come at your call, we enter your ranks, and lo, the same vile machinery of corruption—the same base bribery—the same wicked snares spread to catch the feet of stumbling men, are put in motion by you because forsooth 'the other party does so!' Be warned in time! All men do not regard politics as a scramble or a gambling game. The anti-slavery man values politics, not as an end but as a means through which the people are to be educated up to the idea of justice to all, black men as well as white; through the sphere of politics he labors to do away the hateful prejudice against color at the North that sustains the mass of guilt and blood and horror we call slavery. Be warned in time! Some of us mean to vote as religiously as we pray; and we will act as the powder brains of God, upheaving and rending any organization that dares to ignore the Higher Law."

The series of sermons of the winter of 1857-8 which had awakened the censures of Rev. Mr. Greenwood we have not before

us, but a manuscript has survived upon "Slavery, Its Idea, Fruit and Remedy," which must have been delivered during the latter half of the year 1857 and in which the statement of the minister's attitude toward the subject is explicit and unequivocal. It was originally marked "A discourse preached before the Unitarian Society in Dover, July 12, 1857"—but these words are run through. The discourse may possibly have been delivered sometime after, but delivered it certainly must have been and at a date not later than the winter which followed.

Not merely of reproaches against the South and its leaders of opinion is this discourse composed. Some of its most stinging passages, indeed, are directed at Northern men and institutions. "Almost all the leading merchants of the North accept the pro-slavery idea," he laments, and adds, "This is the only Christian country where commerce is hostile to freedom."

The press of the North too, we read, is unsympathetic toward the agitation, "scarcely a leading journal of commerce and politics until the last five years" accepting the anti-slavery idea. The universities and colleges of the North he arraigns with fiery invective for their corrupt silence upon the question, and adds with bitterness, "Our American Tract Society circulates four million of tracts a year and it has not yet published a single line showing that it is wicked to buy and sell a man for whom, according to the belief, Christ died."

Nor do the discriminatory regulations against the negro, existing in the Northern states before the war—the parallel of the "Jim Crow laws" of the South today—go unchallenged. "How universal at the North," he explains, "this brutal scorn of the negro simply because he is a negro! It is the Northern stronghold of the pro-slavery idea. It appears in many ways in the free states in our separate accommodation for colored people on our railroads and steam-boats and in the negro seats at our churches and theatres."

Indeed he goes farther and intimates that it is the lingering influence of the institution of slavery as it existed in early colonial times at the North which is paralyzing the moral sense of the Northern press and its commerce and its institutions of learning. "Our fathers," he says, "used the money they had gained in the *slave trade* to win the battles of freedom" during the American Revolutionary War, "and our works do testify of us that we are their children."

Turning to the question of slavery proper, the minister declared that the right of property in human beings was the foundation of the institution of chattel slavery—"a right which God never gave and which man could not."

"The slave captors in Africa," he says, "could plead no other title to their prey than that of lawless violence and a mastery too strong for its victim, and if they had no good title they could convey none to others." Nonetheless, he continues, this creature became a possession, a thing owned, a species of live-stock, and the slave trader of the North and South declined to believe that this being was included in the words of Christ, "When ye see one of the least of these, my brethren, weary or naked or poor or in prison, and ye minister unto him, ye have done it unto me."

Once established as an institution, he remarks, chattel slavery took an even deeper hold, infecting the reason of men so that when the Declaration of Independence was penned and the ringing sentence uttered that "all men are created free and equal" the words stood with an equivocal meaning, for beside the writers were their slaves whom they excepted from this generalization. "The history of our land," observed our preacher, "furnishes the saddest of all warnings against the peril of a compromise with sin," and he added:

"Our fathers fully shared in that instinctive and cruel scorn with which the Anglo-Saxon has always treated the weaker races. They hated slavery for themselves, they rushed unprepared into the blood and fire of an eight years' war rather than brook its most distant approach in the shape of an insignificant tax, but they did not so hate slavery for the African. They would not endure white-slavery of the stamp tax for a single year, no, not for twenty-four hours, but they thought it not unbearable to admit negro slavery within the federal compact—to recognize the foreign slave trade till 1808—to permit to slave property a representation denied to all other property—to permit the recapture and return of fugitive slaves—and to promise the aid of the militia and treasury of the North in putting down a slave insurrection—thereby condemning the negro for taking the same course with his oppressors that they themselves did with their own English tyrants.

"They did not see, as we see, the incompatibility of the two great ideas—the idea of democracy and the idea of despotism—the admission of equal rights, and the denial of equal rights, dwelling side by side in the same national house. They did not know that not till Satan and Christ sit as brothers upon the same Heavenly

throne shall slavery and freedom co-exist without each clutching the throat of the other. They did not know that the universe was *one*; that a wrong done upon its farthest circumference is carried in trembling vibrations to its center; that when, well-nigh a century ago, they stood by assenting to the bondage of the negro, though but for a season, *every blow riveting his fetters would recoil upon the heads of their children's children.*"

This emphasis upon the "peril of compromise with sin" and of the avenging Nemesis which should call upon "the children's children" for the price of the compromise, stalks through the manuscript sermons of this period like the Fate in the old Greek drama, and when we think of the smoke of the blood of a broken people which a few years later lifted to Heaven from a hundred battle fields a feeling is born such as arises when we read the Old Testament prophecies and take note of the dire consequences the prophet denounces against the people's sin.

"See how quickly evil seed bears fruit in a fertile soil. America put slavery into the Constitution, incorporating those wicked compromises that have brought death into our political world and all our woe. Then out of the old soil she made four new slave states, then she bought the Louisiana territory and put slavery into it, then she made Louisiana, Missouri and Arkansas slave states, then she made slavery perpetual in Florida, then she annexed Texas, then she fought the Mexican War, gaining Utah and New Mexico for new slave soil. Then America gave ten millions of money to support slavery in Texas, passed the Fugitive Slave Bill, and has since kidnapped men in New England, in all the west, and in all the middle states. Then America repealed the Missouri Compromise, throwing open to the chances of settlement a country pledged to freedom, of unsurpassed fertility, lying in the heart of the continent, and more spacious than France and Germany combined, and then by the last presidential election she has endorsed the conquest of Kansas and made slavery national."

What, then, of the future? Already faint rumblings are heard which tell of coming trouble and the cloud "no bigger than a man's hand" is to be seen dimly on the horizon. Already, doubtless also, the daring young preacher has resolved what shall be *his* course if that cloud blackens and broadens and gives birth to the storm prophetic vision had foretold with its hideous wreck and roar; but nonetheless there is no faltering, no measuring of words, no shrink-

ing from the tempest of which the first whiffs even then were fanning the check.

"The pro-slavery idea will go on devouring right and left till, as in Greece and Rome, it strangles freedom or till it is strangled, by it. There can be no peace until one or the other falls. Slavery must slay freedom or be slain by it.

"I remember our lineage and our blood, the foremost race of time. I remember that this is the nineteenth century, not the ninth. I remember the men and women scattered through the land who have never bowed the knee to the Baal of Compromise, who have never been found faithless to the God-given rights of man, to the Divine Truth crucified between the thieves of Law and Order by priest and politician.

"Yea, from the very extravagance of the success of the pro-slavery idea, I infer the salvation of the North. In every political struggle since 1782, the idea of the South has been the gainer, till the tide turned, and on the plains of Kansas, though backed by the united South and by the office-holders, the judiciary, the treasury and the dragoons of the government, it has met with rout.

"Why was this? It was because that so long and silently borne by the negro was there transferred to the shoulders of the Saxon, and every township from Maine to Minnesota thrilled at the tidings of their *white* brethren enslaved on the far-off prairies.

"I hope much from the roused conscience and the startled sentiment of danger which the last two months have called into life in the heart of the Northern man. Formerly he knew in his practical way that slavery was poor housekeeping and he felt in a sort of dim and muddy manner that it was a huge lie and an unmeasured wrong turning his Fourth of July oratory into a burlesque; still he was content to sit in uneasy silence, hoping it would all somehow 'come out right.'

"Now he sees and feels for himself what for thirty years the despised prophets of the land have been vainly sounding in his ears, that he cannot trade or spin or sleep in peace with his own freedom while anywhere on the broad continent the oligarchic idea of Greece and Rome is permitted to tear from a single man, white or black, his natural, God-given rights; that his own fireside under the shade of the northern hills is not free while the sights and sounds of bondage poison the far-distant shores of the Red River.

"We must create a sentiment at the North so strong and high that our leaders in Washington will talk less of the 'compromises

of the constitution' and more of its spirit. Politicians are proverbially forgetful—we, the people, must freshen their memories; we must point them to a united radically anti-slavery North, so fixed and firm that under pain of losing their political heads they will no longer dare to compromise—they will no longer dare to profusely 'deprecate any wish to interfere with slavery as it is' in the states or claim the support of Southern men for their party as 'affording the best security for slave property'—assertions which if true disgrace the people and if false disgrace themselves.

"God save the nation if such utterances as these are to stand as the high water marks of our anti-slavery politics! No! the signs of the time, the Vox Populi and the Vox Dei unite in thundering forth no such apologetic dilutions, no such blanched and bloodless politicians' gospel! No! just as the slave power goes for slavery, 'slavery first, last and always, and if that involves dissolution, let it come,' so we are to go for liberty first, last and always, and if that involves dissolution, let it come."

Strong words these assuredly, though no stronger than those coming up, hot as a furnace breath, from the South. It was almost beyond hope that such feeling, growing more inflamed on either side with each fresh event, should end in ways of peace and quietness. The fatal spark only was wanting to touch off this combustible material and start the devouring conflagration, and that spark was not wanting long.